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Remarks

of
Secretary Dan Glickman
Report of National Commission on Small Farms
Washington, D.C. -- January 22, 1998

Good morning. Thank you all for coming. I want to thank my colleague from Congress, Harold Volkmer, for chairing the National Commission on Small Farms. He's here with his new wife Dian(ne); with the commission's vice-chairs Kathleen Sullivan Kelley, who runs her family farm out in Colorado, and Dr. Desmond Jolly, Director of the U.C. Davis Small Farm Program in California; along with other members of the commission. I want to thank each of you -- along with Jennifer Yezak Molen and Barbara Meister -- for an outstanding job these past 6 months.

For decades, our nation has watched its small farm heritage disappear. We are here to do something about it -- to help give small farmers a real opportunity to compete and succeed in a new, rapidly changing world. You know, for a while I talked about the need to help small farmers survive. But I was down at Langston University not too long ago, and when I said that, a farmer stood up, and said, 'I don't want to survive, I want to grow, and make it just like the big guys.' Ever since, I've stood corrected. I want to see small farmers grow and prosper and get ahead.

It's an easy thing to say. It's another challenge entirely to come up with effective ways to get it done. So when I created this commission, I asked a very practical question: Can government really help, or would we just be battling economic forces beyond our control? I also asked that we move beyond a divisive 'is-bigger-better' debate, and focus on a more fundamental question: Can we find a way for small and large farms to coexist and succeed together in the 21st century?

After holding hearings across the country ... after listening to farmers, researchers, creditors, rural residents and extension folks -- this Commission has heard in great detail about the challenges facing today's small farmers: from lack of affordable credit; to program delivery that's too often geared toward the big producers; to indifference toward small farmers' need for research into low-tech, affordable innovations. We've also heard plenty of ideas about solutions. Many are reflected in this report which tells us that yes, small farmers can have a vibrant place in agriculture's future ... if America chooses to take a stand. USDA is poised to act on this report quickly and decisively. This administration will not stand by and watch hard-working, family farmers relegated to a footnote in a history book.

That being said, I want to reiterate something that this report makes very clear: this is not a silver bullet. There is no easy, quick fix to the disappearance of America's small farms. If there were, it would have happened a long time ago. That's why I asked the Commission to look at everything the department does -- from credit, to outreach, to conservation, to research, to business development, to risk management -- and tell us what we're doing right, and what we could do better for small farmers. In short, I asked them to challenge us, which they have.

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This report contains 146 recommendations. They reach across the department. They are recommendations that focus -- in very direct, positive ways -- the attention and resources of USDA on small, beginning and minority farmers.

Harold will go over the report in detail. But I want to quickly raise 2 points. The first is that this report agrees with me on a timely, critical matter. If we are concerned about the hardship facing small farmers, then we must right the wrong of the '96 Farm Bill which categorically declared every farmer who's ever had a debt write-down ineligible for USDA loans. That's a stricter standard than private lenders use. It's wrong. And, the longer we take to fix it, the more good people lose their land.

I will expeditiously send to Congress emergency legislation to address this problem. This legislation must pass in time for the upcoming planting season. Failure to provide this relief will deny hundreds if not thousands of farmers adequate funds to prepare this year's crop. I believe that we can do it in a common-sense, responsible way that is fair to farmers and to taxpayers. I encourage Congress to act promptly on this, and I stand ready to work closely with agricultural leaders on the Hill to expedite this effort.

You will also soon get official word of something that I've said from day one: this report has a friend in high places. President Clinton will borrow heavily from its pages in his 1999 budget. He will match -- dollar for dollar -- the recommendations of this report that call for a substantial increase in direct farm operating and ownership loans. This will help 1,000 beginning farmers get on the land, and 12,000 more stay there. President Clinton's budget also reflects this commission's proposal to fully fund the 2501 loan program which provides outreach and technical assistance for small farmers. This would be 3 times what the program got last year. With these commitments, this Administration is making a serious down payment on the future of the small, family farm.

We're moving forward on the big-ticket credit and outreach proposals; other pieces, like the credit fix, require legislation; others will need further consideration; none will gather dust.

Today, I would like to announce an action team which will be headed by Deputy Secretary Rominger and include the heads of rural development; research, education and extension; marketing and regulatory programs; natural resources and the environment; the farm and foreign agricultural services, as well as the director of our new office of outreach.

Now, that's a diverse, high-level group, and for an important reason: a bureaucratic, stove-pipe approach won't cut it. We need one seamless USDA strategy on small farms -- one that works across mission areas and gets the job done. In September, I'll ask the commission to check up on our progress, but as of today we are moving into the action phase.

Over this past year, participating in many of these meetings, I've had the chance to talk to small farmers across the country. There's an energy, exuberance and love for the land and their work that's as American as the crops and livestock they raise. Small farmers are an important part of the American fabric. They need our help to reach their full potential in the 21st century. This Administration is determined that they get it. It is, indeed, 'a time to act.'

Now, I'd like to introduce the Chairman of the National Commission on the Small Farm, Harold Volkmer.

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